

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 6, 2007

INTRODUCTION: Last Sunday we heard a little bit about Paul's first missionary journey. He won many converts and at the same time ran into many obstacles and much opposition. Today's first reading is still part of Paul's first journey as he makes his return trip back to the Church in Antioch in Syria. He is revisiting cities where he had already preached. The names of the cities are all foreign to us, and today's reading could confuse us in that there were two cities named Antioch. The first Antioch mentioned here was one of the cities which he and Barnabas had visited in what is today Turkey. It was one of the cities that rejected Paul. The second Antioch, in Syria, was one of the four largest cities in the Roman Empire. This Christian community was the one who initially sent Paul and Barnabas out to evangelize. Paul was returning to report how things went. He acknowledged that at times it wasn't easy.

HOMILY: We're obsessed with what's new. We often greet one another that way. The media invests heavily in keeping up-to-date with the news. Businesses work hard to create new products, new ideas, and new ways of doing things. Research and industry are giving us new ways to save lives as well as new ways to destroy them. We look for new ways to have fun and to find happiness. Thus all of us should be able to relate to God's words in today's reading from the Book of Revelation: "Behold, I make all things new." It is not just a new product or new idea God is bringing about. It will be so all encompassing, so radically new and wonderful, that the visionary tells us it will be a new heavens and a new earth.

The book of Revelations can only provide hints of what this new heavens and new earth will be like. For starters, there will be no more suffering or sickness or pain. Death will be done away with. We shall never have to say good-bye to those we love. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. We will be totally transformed. We will all love each other. There will be no more wars or killing or hunger or poverty or prejudice or terrorism. Would you vote for that or do you think it might be too boring?

Well, it is up to us to vote for because we will have a hand in making this new world come about. We want God to come along and wave a magic wand to make it happen. But it won't happen that way. We have to be involved in the process. It's just as if someone invented a medicine that would eliminate cancer; it wouldn't help a person with cancer unless they took the medicine. In a similar way God can't create a new world if we don't help him, if we desire to hold on to the cancer of hatred and jealousy and lustful pleasures and unforgiveness and self-righteous pride.

The new world will come about by living the gospel, by sharing in Christ's risen life, by loving one another as he has loved us - as he tells us in today's gospel. This is not always easy. St. Paul warns us it will not always be easy as he tells us in today's first reading: "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."

The trials Paul was talking about in this passage were the trials of persecution. Compared to what the early Christians had to go through to keep the faith, we have it really easy. We don't have to face the sword or crucifixion or lions in the coliseum. For most of us today, the trials we have to face are basically the trials of trying to be faithful to prayer, to the sacraments, and to God's commandments.

When we think of this new world that God is creating, we usually think of heaven. That can give us a lot of hope and encouragement right now. Certainly we will experience all that God promised us and more in heaven, but God is making all things new right now. We can choose to be part of that process or we can just get in the way.

In the Eucharist we are celebrating today, he is inviting us to share with him in this process of creation. Through the Eucharist he touches our lives with his new life and love as we come together in prayer and faith. He speaks to us in the Scriptures, he prays with us as our high priest, he feeds us with his own body and blood to strengthen us and nourish us. [Today we have with us three children from our parish who are going to receive the Eucharist for the first time. The Eucharist is spiritual food which nourishes the risen life of Christ in us and which helps his life in us to grow and deepen. Just as we need to eat every day to stay strong and healthy, so the Eucharist is creating newness of life in us. May you grow each week from this holy food which you will receive for the first time today.] It is only in Christ and by living his life now that a new world will come to be, both now and in eternity. Without him we are like a lamp that is not plugged in. We cannot shine. With him we have the power to love like him, the power to live a new life, and the power to create a new world. Amen.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 13, 2007

INTRODUCTION - The first followers of Christ were all Jewish. They continued to follow their Jewish customs and traditions. When Gentiles also started to believe in Jesus, there was conflict. Many Jewish converts insisted that Gentiles had to adopt Jewish ways if they wanted to consider themselves followers of Jesus. The problem arose especially in Antioch, in Syria, one of the four largest cities in the Roman Empire and racially quite diverse. The setting for our first reading is in Antioch.

HOMILY - I have to tell you a couple of cute stories about moms. Mary was on the way to visit her mother. She had her teenage daughter in the car with her and on the way she commented to her daughter, "Dear, your skirt is a little short isn't it? Her daughter gave her that look: "Oh Mom!" When she arrived at her mother's house, she came in and her mother remarked to Mary: "Dear, your neckline is a little low, isn't it?" Once a mom, always a mom.!

A working mom was out of town at a business conference and, not having a cell phone handy,

she called home collect. Her young son answered the phone and the operator spoke: "I have a Betty Smith on the phone. Will you accept charges?" He dropped the phone and ran into the kitchen to where his father was and screamed out: "They got mom and they want money." No amount of money can measure the value of a good mom."

Today is Mother's Day and I wish a blessed day to all our mothers and grandmothers and substitute mothers. Friday we honored Mary, Jesus' mother and ours, and that's why the statue of Mary is here today. It's an appropriate day to remember Mary our mother.

The events described in our first reading occurred about the year 50 A.D. If you think this issue is irrelevant, consider what the Church might be like today if the apostles decided that all converts to Christ had to follow Jewish ritual, feast days and dietary laws. The nations, by and large, might have rejected Christianity and we would still be worshipping pagan gods. Perhaps we would be avoiding pork and insisting our baby boys be circumcised. We might be learning to read the Old Testament in Hebrew and keeping other Jewish traditions and customs. Notice how the Apostles introduced their decision: "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and ours too..." This has always been the belief of the Church whenever the bishops gather in council together with the Holy Father. It is an important concept especially today when so many people think they do not need any authority in the Church telling them what's right or wrong. Christ gave his Spirit to his Church to lead us to holiness.

I want to talk especially about heaven today. Today's second reading is an excerpt from the book of Revelation where heaven is described. At the time this book was written, the early Christians were suffering under a bitter persecution. It was written to give them encouragement and hope. The description of heaven (a.k.a. the heavenly Jerusalem) is awesome. If you get out your bibles, you will get much more of a description of the heavenly Jerusalem than our brief reading today gives us. In those days a city was surrounded by a wall to protect the inhabitants of the city from wild animals and enemies. The wall of the heavenly Jerusalem was high, 1500 miles high, and broad, 1500 miles in four directions, forming a perfect cube. The wall was over 200 feet thick. Quite a bit of protection there. The foundation stones for the wall were various gems on which the names of the twelve apostles were written, showing the city is founded on the apostles. We've all heard jokes about what happens at heaven's gate, but notice there are twelve gates. The gates of the city, open in all four directions, indicate that God's kingdom is open to all people. The gates are each made of a single pearl (thus the term: the pearly gates). The gates have inscribed on them the names of the twelve tribes of Israel indicating the Old Testament roots of our faith. The dimensions of the city would be about half the size of the United States! That's some city. The size symbolizes the multitude of people that will fill God's kingdom. The city was pure gold, clear as glass, and the streets of the city were pure gold. I've told this joke before about the guy who made a deal with God. He asked God to allow him to take one thing with him when he died. God said okay, so he chose to take all his gold with him. When he died and arrived in heaven, lugging his satchel of gold, St. Peter asked him what he was going to do with that big bag of pavement. Of course all this is symbolic. It's the Bible's best attempt to describe the glory of heaven. The city is described as coming down out of heaven

from God. In other words, God is its source, and it is not here yet, but it's on its way for those who are faithful.

The city is without a temple for we will experience God directly. No temple will be needed. It needs no light for its source of light is God, who is the fullness of light. The gates are never shut during the day, and since it is always day, the gates are never shut. That means God holds out his invitation to all who will answer. But it also tells us not everyone answers. No one evil shall enter the city. They have shut themselves out.

In our common way of thinking of heaven, we picture God deciding on who comes in or who doesn't. This is a simple way of expressing a more abstract truth. A life of holiness will lead to happiness and a life of wrongdoing will lead to unhappiness. In reality, however, it is not God who decides who gets in and who doesn't. That decision is made by each of us. That is what today's gospel teaches us. Something has to happen in a person's life before they can "get into" heaven. Heaven has to "get into" them. Jesus tells us "whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him." Having God in us, living in us, animating us with his grace, loving us with his infinite love, uniting us with one another through his Spirit is what will constitute the glory of heaven. Instead of worrying whether we will be "in" or "out," our focus should be on whether and to what extent we are letting God "in," having time for him, serving him or whether we're too busy to pray or to give him our time or our service.

Feast of the Ascension

May 20, 2007

INTRODUCTION: St. Luke gave us two books in the New Testament: The Acts of the Apostles and, of course, his gospel. We hear from both of them today. The gospel ends with the ascension and the Acts of the Apostles begins with the ascension. You'll notice when you hear the first reading from the Acts, he refers to his gospel as his "first book." It is interesting how he treats the ascension in each of these two books. In the Acts he said Jesus ascended 40 days after Easter, but in his gospel he describes how Jesus appeared to his apostles Easter Sunday night, spoke with them, ate with them and then, that night, he led them out to Bethany where he ascended into heaven. It seems as if Jesus' physical departure from the apostles and his return to the Father was not a one-time dramatic event. It was more like a process. One way of thinking of the 40-day period is that after the resurrection Jesus appeared rather frequently to the apostles. Luke's description of the ascension 40 days after Easter seems to mark the end of those frequent appearances. After that Jesus would be present to his followers through the Holy Spirit, the sacraments, and the Church. Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles, tells us of the ways Christ continues to be with us through the Holy Spirit, the sacraments, and the Church.

HOMILY: St. Luke's gospel begins in the temple of Jerusalem with the angel Gabriel announcing to the old priest Zechariah that he and his elderly wife, Elizabeth, would have a baby boy. The angel Gabriel said to him "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard,

and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth." The joy at the birth of John the Baptist was only the beginning of many moments of joy recorded by St. Luke. A few months after Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, he appeared to Mary and asked her to be the mother of our Savior. She said "yes," as we know, and then she immediately sought out her cousin Elizabeth with her good news. Mary expressed herself in the beautiful canticle, the Magnificat: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." When Jesus was born, it was the shepherds who heard the message of joy. The angel said to them: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." I could bore you with a number of Luke's other references to joy, but I'll just fast forward to the ending of his gospel as we just heard.

St. Luke's gospel began in the Temple of Jerusalem and that's where it ends. It also ends with a note of joy, the same sentiment with which it began. After the ascension of Jesus, Luke tells us as Jesus "parted from them and was taken up to heaven, they did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple praising God."

Wouldn't you think the apostles would have been depressed when Jesus left them? If they were thinking only on an earthly level, of course they would have been. For it is natural to grieve when we lose someone who is important to us. But instead of grieving they "returned to Jerusalem with great joy." I can think of at least four reasons why they were so joyful. 1) Jesus had assured them they weren't really losing him. He would still be with them. He assured them, as we heard last Sunday: "whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him." 2) They were joyful because they were happy for him and they loved him enough not to begrudge his return to the Father. After all he did say: "if you truly loved me you would rejoice to have me go to the Father." 3) They were joyful because they knew there were better things ahead. There was the Spirit which they didn't understand yet, but which they trusted to be something wonderful. Jesus told them: "It is better for you that I go, for if I do not go, the Holy Spirit will not come to you." And 4) they knew one day they would be with the Lord forever. He told them he was going to get a place ready for them: "and, if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be."

They would have had no joy if they thought only of their separation from him. After his resurrection they began to see him in a different way. Luke even tells us they "did him homage," a term reserved for worship of God. Their new way of seeing Jesus gave them new faith and hope and love. They could only rejoice in the faith, hope and love that filled them. Can we too rejoice in the ascension of our Lord?